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Book Review

Positive psychology in second language acquisition

Editors:

Peter D. MacIntyre, Tammy Gregersen, Sarah Mercer

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388

As stated elsewhere (Gabryś-Barker & Gałajda, 2016), positive psychology is a new branch of general psychology, which is just over twenty years old. Thus, its applications to teaching and learning second and foreign languages have not taken a very prominent place in scholarly research, and, as a consequence, in its practical classroom dimension. Positive psychology derives from humanistic approaches represented most prominently by Abraham Maslow and Jeremy Bruner, in relation to novel understandings of educational processes, and by Gertrude Moskowitz, in relation to foreign language instruction. The main aim of positive psychology, as declared in *Positive Psychology Manifesto* (Sheldon, Frederikson, Rathunde, Csikszentmihalyi, & Haidt, 2000), is the discovery and understanding of those factors which make it possible for individuals and the communities in which they function to develop and be happy. These factors are registered by positive psychology in the development of positive traits in people, their positive emotions and feelings, and also in contextual factors mostly related to enabling institutions. So, naturally, positive psychology approaches to teaching and learning second/foreign languages (S/FL) and research in this area will range from emphasis on positivity on

the level of emotions and feelings, the motivations and attitudes of teachers, learners and others involved, and strengths of these people as facilitating different aspects of language learning processes, to a significant role assigned to educational institutions. Educational institutions are the agents enabling success and development not only of learners but also those of teachers (Gabryś-Barker & Gałajda, 2016; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2014). The volume edited by Gregersen, MacIntyre and Mercer fulfils the promise made by positive psychology in relation to teaching and learning languages in the classroom and beyond it.

The book is a collection of papers representing three perspectives on positive psychology: theoretical, empirical and applied. The volume opens with an introduction by the editors and already at this point the reader will see that the book he/she is about to engage with will be a journey of discovery which excites and makes one look forward to what is ahead. One could hardly imagine a better introduction to a volume on positive psychology than this highly personalised and warm-in-tone introductory text, in which each individual editor reflects on those elements of the book cover image that are meaningful to them. The image shows a hand in water causing ripples; each of the three constitutive elements of hand, ripple and water resonate with the three editors personally as well as with their professional lives as positive psychology practitioners, and, in fact, pioneers of this approach in SLA studies and language instruction. Positivity is felt right from the beginning and sets the tone for the whole volume.

The following chapter is "Toward a Psychology of Well-being for Language Learners: The 'EMPATHICS' Vision" by Rebecca Oxford, a pioneer and a true enthusiast of positive psychology in language learning and teaching. She presents a model in the form of a clever acronym of features which are believed to make learners develop, thrive and thus achieve success in their learning endeavours. The EMPATHICS model stands for nine dimensions conducive to learning, that is, E: emotion and empathy, M: meaning and motivation, P: perseverance (including resilience, hope and optimism), A: agency and autonomy, T: time, H: hardiness and habits of mind, I: intelligences, C: character strengths, and S: self-factors (self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem, self-verification). The discussion of each of these dimensions is well-informed and well-grounded in scholarly research. It is in fact a source not only of discussion of classic publications in the area (the above dimensions), but also of those most recent ones in psychology, pedagogy and language acquisition/learning and teaching. This author strongly emphasises the interactional and dynamic character of the dimensions involved in learning. At the same time, as enthusiastic as she is for positive psychology, Oxford also points to flaws in this fairly new area of research only now being pioneered in its applications. The flaws are seen in the clear lack of contextualisation and in an absence of focus on cultural issues, which are both essential factors in S/FL learning and teaching.

The first part of the book entitled "Part 1: Theoretical" brings together three papers which introduce the constructs fundamental to positive psychology. In "Seeing the World Through Your Eyes: Empathy in Language Learning and Teaching," Sarah Mercer discusses the concept of empathy and places it in the pedagogical context of language instruction. Apart from an informed presentation of the concept, what is especially valuable here is the focus on empathy issues in teacher training and sensitising both trainers and trainees to them. In the text "The Dynamics of Past Selves in Language Learning and Well-Being," Joseph Falout demonstrates how various factors that form the past self of a learner can have an impact on learning success and generally his/her well-being. In the final chapter in this part, written by Ana Maria Barcelos and Hilda Simone Coelho and titled "Language, Learning and Teaching: What's Love Got To Do With It?," the authors present the concept of love as seen by researchers in education and psychology, but also those in biology. By trying to find commonalities between the three areas of study, they conclude their overview with a strongly expressed need for focus on studying love in language teaching and learning by posing questions for further study. Each of the chapters in the theoretical part of the volume is complemented with an extensive list of references relevant to each of the discussed concepts. Some of them bring the reader back to seminal publications but also allow him or her to be updated on the latest research in the areas discussed in this literature overview part of the volume.

"Part 2: Empirical" consists of seven original empirical studies focusing on different FL instructional settings and demonstrating the results of research on language success and well-being from a positive psychology perspective. It opens with a text by Tammy Gregersen, Peter MacIntyre and Margarita Meza entitled "Positive Psychology Exercises Build Social Capital for Language Learners: Preliminary Evidence," presenting ways of building networks between people (learners, teachers) which constitute a significant source of their well-being. This includes a sense of belonging, personal safety and appreciation by others and, therefore, these networks are seen to build social capital. In this exciting text, the positive psychology exercises (PPEs) presented by the authors rely upon a set of techniques involving laughter, physical activity, interacting with animals, listening to music, expressing gratitude and engaging altruism. Each of these techniques can be personalised according to the needs and proclivities of individual learners in *conversation partners*, a peer-monitoring group activity carried out by research assistants and students involved in a project on positive psychology. The study carried out in the above format showed that personalized encounters developed positive emotional engagement and social contacts, thus building social capital. Other chapters in the empirical part of the book take up the issues of hope and resilience in novice teachers, for example, in Phil Hiver's

"The Triumph Over Experience: Hope and Hardiness in Novice L2 Teachers;" *flow*, as experienced by FL learners in Eva Czimmermann and Katalin Piniel's text "Advanced Language Learners' Experience of Flow in the Hungarian EFL Classroom;" and the theme of enjoyment and FL anxiety in an interesting empirical study by well-known scholars researching affectivity issues, Jean-Marc Dewaele and Peter D. MacIntyre, in "Foreign Language Enjoyment and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety: The Right and Left Feet of the Language Learner." The remaining three chapters in this part focus on the role of a positive self in language achievement, demonstrated by J. Lake's "Accentuate the Positive L2 Self and its Relationship to L2 Proficiency;" positive affectivity and development of motivation in Zana Ibrahim's "Affect in Directed Motivational Currents: Positive Emotionality in Long-Term L2 Engagement;" and, finally, the self-regulated learner in "Project Perseverance: Helping Students Become Self-Regulating Learners" by R. Kirk Benlap, Jennifer Bown, Dan P. Dewey, Linea P. Benlap and Patrick R. Stefan. Each of the above chapters illustrates very well what positive psychology research in SLA stands for and how it can contribute to the well-being of a learner/teacher. The studies discussed present—I do not hesitate to say this—truly innovative research projects. They demonstrate the results of well-designed scholarly studies of what positive psychology can do in a FL classroom in terms of creating a learning environment conducive to both academic achievement and well-being of (mostly) FL learners. I hope that in future empirical studies on positive psychology in SLA, there will be more direct focus on teachers and creating conditions for their well-being as, in this part of the book, this is not adequately represented. Teachers are major agents of change in their classrooms and, for this reason, their well-being should also become a major focus of the study of positive psychology in language classrooms. The chapters in this part of the book provide the reader with a thorough bibliographical background to the issues presented in empirical studies, which will allow the reader to deepen his or her theoretical understanding and knowledge of the issues touched upon.

The third part of this volume, "Part 3: Applied," aims at presenting examples of positive psychology techniques in practice. It consists of four chapters on FL classroom teaching and a final chapter by the editors of the volume. In the opening chapter, "Happiness in ESL/EFL: Bringing Positive Psychology to the Classroom," Marc Helgesen goes back to the first model of Seligman's PERMA, which stands for Positive emotion, Engagement, Positive Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment, and focuses on the role of positive emotions in the classroom by designing a set of activities that promote positivity in a FL classroom. Tim Murphey in "Teaching to Learn and Well-Become: Many Mini-Renaissances" takes up the idea of task-based learning and teaching, and turns his classroom (and beyond) language tasks into mini-renaissances, that is, tasks

with a creative element allowing learners to become teachers in what Murphey calls "interactive-helping" task-focus approach. As his initial results show, the learners learnt more than through a regular teaching approach, also demonstrating higher levels of enjoyment and engagement. On offering a short overview of studies on the effects and advantages that positive psychology tasks bring, in the chapter entitled "Why and How to Use Positive Psychology Activities in the Second Language Classroom" Candy Fresacher presents a set of activities she used with her university students in a language programme which aimed at the development of management communication skills. These activities may be of use to the reader as they can be easily adapted to different learners and different contexts. Music is a great resource for the FL classroom and a positive psychology perspective on its use is presented in M. Carmen Fonseca-Mora and Francisco Herrero Machancoses's chapter "Music and Language Learning: Emotions and Engaging Memory Pathways." The authors, following Schopenhauer, argue that the objective of their text is "to explore the power of music beyond the pleasure and enjoyment it causes" (p. 363). And indeed the authors meet this challenge by presenting a fairly extensive body of literature and research exploring music and human well-being, together with the role of melody and rhythm in language learning. However, what is missing from this chapter seems to be the practical aspect as no tasks or activities are proposed to follow their overview. One cannot help the feeling that this text should therefore have been placed elsewhere in the volume and not in its practical section.

The concluding chapter of the book, written by Peter D. MacIntyre, Tammy Gregersen and Sarah Mercer, once again justifies the need for positive psychology research in the context of SLA, showing how it can expand present interest in integrative approaches to SLA. It points to the need for combining two dimensions in teaching and learning languages: the cognitive and the affective. The editors rightly state that their volume expands the range of topics which respond to this approach and at the same time derive from the assumptions of positive psychology. They summarise the above by stating that the chapters: "(1) Synthesize the positive and negative . . . (2) Build on historical antecedents and exiting knowledge . . . (3) Integrate across the levels of analysis . . . (4) [And] build constituency and reach out to powerful stakeholders . . . (5) Description or prescription?" (p. 374-379).

The book *Positive Psychology in Second Language Acquisition* is one of the very few publications in this new area of study. It is thoroughly thought through and consistent both in its content and structure. It provides the reader with a detailed bibliography in each of the chapters, constituting in itself a valuable source for a particular topical area. The book can be recommended to a wide spectrum of readers as it caters for different scholarly and practical needs. First of all, it offers a solid background on the principles of positive psychology for

those who are not familiar with this new branch of psychology. It also presents reliable and rigorous research in this area for readers who may have some reservations about the scholarly character of studies grounded in positive psychology. Additionally, the book demonstrates how the principles of positive psychology can be applied to foreign language instruction, which thus may become more innovative and creative. The practical examples presented here can be adapted to FL teachers' individual contexts and enrich them with a new dimension relevant not only for cognitive development but also for affective and personality growth of both teachers and learners. One aspect that is perhaps missing from the text (which I would have expected to find either in the opening or in the concluding chapter) is a more direct defence of positive psychology as a new area of study and a scholarly discipline against the criticism it has received in some academic circles, which consider it to be a branch of self-help ideology. This should, however, have been addressed directly by the editors. On the other hand, the book defends itself as a worthy source of knowledge on the theory, research and practice of positive psychology in specific areas of foreign language teaching and learning. I fully endorse and recommend the volume for its expertise and scholarly discipline on the one hand and for the excitement and creativity it encourages on the other.

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